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Dance Night at the Barn:

Documenting the Line Dancing Tradition of Upstate New York

BY IRYNA VOLOSHYNA

After graduating from the Folklore program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, I was excited about moving to upstate New York to do my internship at the Folklife Center at Crandall Public Library in Glens Falls. Escaping the summer heat and Southern humidity also were a big part of my excitement. Looking for a place to live was not easy, hence, the specificity of the region. Tourist-oriented accommodations were too expensive for me. Luckily, I ended up renting a place in Corinth, Saratoga County, New York.

My first impression of the village was that a lack of entertainment was balanced out by the cleanest mountain air, easy access to the local beach on the Hudson River, multiple hiking trails, and a chance to observe bright stars in the silence from my deck at night.

Little did I know about the silence! As it turned out, I found out very soon that my landlords, local business owners, host music events several nights a week at a place called “The Barn” in downtown Corinth. Whether I wanted it or not, every Wednesday, Friday, and

Saturday night, I could be sitting at home or on the deck, hearing musicians playing on the stage and seeing people dancing to the music, often with their ice cream or a hot dog in hand. Half joking, I told my supervisor Todd DeGarmo, Director of the Folklife Center, about these musical evenings. We both agreed that it was very sweet, and he once mentioned that it could even be worth documenting. Because these music nights had quickly become my new routine, I hadn’t thought of them seriously (like many of us sometimes do),



Logo of the Barn in Corinth, New York. All photos are by the author and courtesy of The Folklife Center of Crandall Public Library, Glens Falls, New York.



Kevin Richards, country music DJ.

as being culturally significant enough for documentation.

A couple of weeks later, I saw a sign in my parking lot that said: “Dance night this Saturday with Country Music DJ Kevin Richards.” Well, I thought, if a DJ is coming, this has become way too interesting to ignore it. So, I approached my landlady Deb to express my interest in filming the event, and she was all for it. Moreover, she even asked permission from her other tenant, who happened to live in a place overlooking the “Barn,” so that I could get a nice downward looking shot from their deck.

When I showed up with my camera and a tripod that night, I definitely felt like an outsider at first. People in small groups around the tables seemed to know each other very well and were exchanging their greetings and warm hugs, as some were just arriving and joining their friends. Not waiting long, I introduced myself to Kevin Richards right away. With a line of people waiting to say hi and welcome him back, he was happy to tell me a little about the event and about himself:

My name is Kevin Richards, and I am here in my hometown in Corinth, New York, at the Corinth “Barn.” I return every year to host a homecoming country dance party. This is where I was born and raised. I started my radio career here at the age of 12 years old, at a little radio station just down the road called WSCG. From there, I’ve worked at country radio stations all over the Northeast [United

States]. It’s always a pleasure for me to come back every year and share my love of country music with the people that watched me grow up! I am here tonight to teach them a few line dances, play a little country trivia—just get everybody out to have a good time listening and dancing to country music, while they eat some delicious food here at the Corinth Barn.



The dances.



The dancers.

After such a comprehensive introduction to the world of line dancing, unbeknown to me, Kevin offered to introduce the group of their regulars he had mentioned to me. To my surprise, they turned out to be a group of sweet, elderly ladies, notably energetic and enthusiastic about having a chance to talk to me. I was fascinated by the sparkles in their eyes and their readiness to dive into dancing, right after our little interview. It turned out, they had been dancing for over 20 years with Kevin. They all repeat each other, saying that it has become their dance *family*, a place where they can always come back and have fun. Pat-in-a-Hat, as she introduced herself, 74, says that on top of it being a great form of physical exercise, she also sees line dancing as a mental exercise, since during their gatherings they are supposed to remember the steps of the dances. Dorothy, 81, says that she started line dancing after her husband passed away, and she could dance without a partner. Janice, 75, adds that, at first, she just wanted something to do, and then it became an obsession—sometimes, they dance

Kevin also explained what line dancing is, in just a few words:

Line dancing is something I've been doing here in the Northeast for several years. Some of you may remember it from *Boot Scootin' Boogie* and *Achy Breaky Heart*, when it was really big back in the early '90s. And it is continuing to grow and grow and grow. And people still line dance today all over the world. And today, at the Corinth Barn, I am gonna show

some people how to do it. And you'll also see, in the crowd, some people that already know how to do it—some of our regulars, who go by the name Country Kickers of Upstate New York. And if you want to learn more about line dancing, just go to Country Kickers of Upstate New York on Facebook, or if you go to my website <www.kevinrichards.com>, I have videos, steps, and music there, so you can learn how to join us.



Long-time dancers (left to right)—Dorothy, Pat, and Janice.



Long-time dancers (left to right)—Susanne and Jacob.

four or five nights a week! Moreover, these ladies, as well as other members of their group, have also traveled a lot with Kevin.

“Florida, Nashville, Texas, Country Cruises—we’ve been all over with him! We are just following him, like a group—ie!” they say, laughing.

Another part of every dancing night, says Pat, is eating in different places. They like coming to the Barn, because they always get ice cream sundaes.

On that note, I complimented the ladies on their great shape and let them get prepared for the dance night that they had been waiting for so eagerly. It was extremely sweet to watch them dancing, thoroughly following the steps and singing along to the songs. It really felt like they were comfortably dancing here, in the space where they could just be themselves, with the people they love.

Susanne and Jacob have been neighbors and family friends forever and are also experienced line dancers. “I was told I had to start exercising, which I hate to do. So, I started line dancing, because I

absolutely love country music. And what a better way to get your exercise than with country music?” said Susanne, who like many others, was proudly wearing blue jeans and cowboy boots.

Her companion Jake chimed in to share his experience of line dancing: “I do it because I’ve always liked dance. I danced a little bit in college, and I’ve been doing this for 20 years, since I was 4. When I was 12 years old, I danced on a stage at Disney World. It was very cool!”

Susanne also adds that she has been to San Antonio twice, and she has been to Nashville several times with Kevin. “Kevin has just been the light of my life. I don’t know where I’d be today without him, because he keeps me dancing, and I need the exercise.”

Jacob adds: “It has just been such a good community that has been formed, too. I feel like we are all so close; we all know each other so well. He’s made a family.” In just a few minutes, they went off to dance, and people were joining them by stepping in and catching up

instantly. The smooth, almost natural moves of the dancers were very comforting to watch.

Despite all the high praise that I heard about Kevin Richards (like the “light of my life”—you don’t say that about just anyone!), he behaved very modestly, almost unnoticeably. Aside from announcing the songs, he was just standing on the stage with his laptop, doing his DJ job. Later, he did give a break to the dancing crowd by playing Country Trivia with special offers—free dinners and ice cream from the Barn.

It was especially pleasant to see several generations present at the event. For instance, I met a family of three people—a granddaughter Cecilia, her mother Diane, and her grandfather Bill.

Cecilia started line dancing six years ago, when she was three. “It helps me get my mind off of things. After I do things at school, I can just relax and dance.”

At first, Diane and Bill had been listening to Kevin on the radio. Then, they started line dancing in 1998, and have

Ten Weeks as a Folklorist: My Reflections on the New York State Council on the Arts—New York Folklore Internship

A fresh graduate from the Folklore program at the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill with a Master's degree, and an international student, I was surprised and flattered to receive an email one Monday morning about getting a NYCSA internship in upstate New York. It meant a big move for me, but at the same time a great step forward in my career. Looking forward to adventures that were awaiting me in the near future, I packed my suitcases and headed north, abandoning the heat of a way-too-humid-for-me Southern summer.

The project I was going to work on the most during my internship was pretty straightforward, yet multidimensional. The Folklife Center at Crandall Public Library in Glens Falls, New York, received a grant for the “Lake George On the Water” project, designed to tell stories of the people, places, and traditions of the Lake George watershed in a series of mini-documentaries. My task was to help with the documentaries. Frankly speaking, I always wanted to take a class in video editing and/or photography at UNC, but somehow it always overlapped with something more important or mandatory. Thus, it was a great chance for me to learn the filming and video editing techniques from my colleagues—Kevin Rogan and Hannah DeGarmo. Step by step, they patiently taught me how to use the Final Cut Pro software, the camera, the audio recording equipment, and much more, answering a million of my silly questions and just supporting me in my learning process. I am going to take this opportunity to thank them for being so great to me!

I started my internship doing archival research and producing two-minute historical documentaries on the places and people of the Lake George area. Not only did I learn a lot about the local history and culture, but now I had the responsibility to tell these stories to others through my documentaries. It was quite challenging, but also extremely exciting. During my student years at UNC, I was taught to listen to the voices of the often marginalized communities and to use my training to represent them and advocate for them. For my projects, I chose the topics that interested me the most. For instance, along with a piece on Fort William Henry Hotel, a great tourist destination in the area, mostly for the rich and famous, I dedicated one of my pieces to those who worked hard to make the experience at the hotel unforgettable—the hotel workers. Cooks, waiters and waitresses, laundry ladies, musicians, farmers, construction workers, and many others, in my opinion, deserve recognition as those who play an extremely important role in the history of the tourist industry of the area. Another video documentary honored Native history of the region, where I tried to decolonize the narrative of the Battlefield Park monuments in Lake George village. The Wiawaka Center for Women and African American folk musician Tedd Browne who wrote an album about Lake George—they all became pages, if not chapters, in the new local history, but this time more diverse and inclusive. By the end of my internship, I had produced seven historical documentaries and another video dedicated to the line dancing tradition in Corinth, New York.

Filming in the field definitely was a new experience for me. Even if, sometimes, my assistance only consisted of holding a light reflector or checking the sound quality during the recording, I still learned quite a lot. Moreover, I met many amazing people in the area—a steamboat builder, an Abenaki storyteller, and a ship pilot, to name a few. It was a truly unforgettable experience to take part in filming and production of the seven documentary interviews, which will be a part of the “Lake George on the Water” project.

Also, I had a chance to participate in many other smaller projects, like helping to install the 2018 Audubon Photography Award Show; assisting with publicity for the *Live! Folklife* concert series for Fall 2019; writing meta data for the Crandall Public Library Folklife Collection, and more.

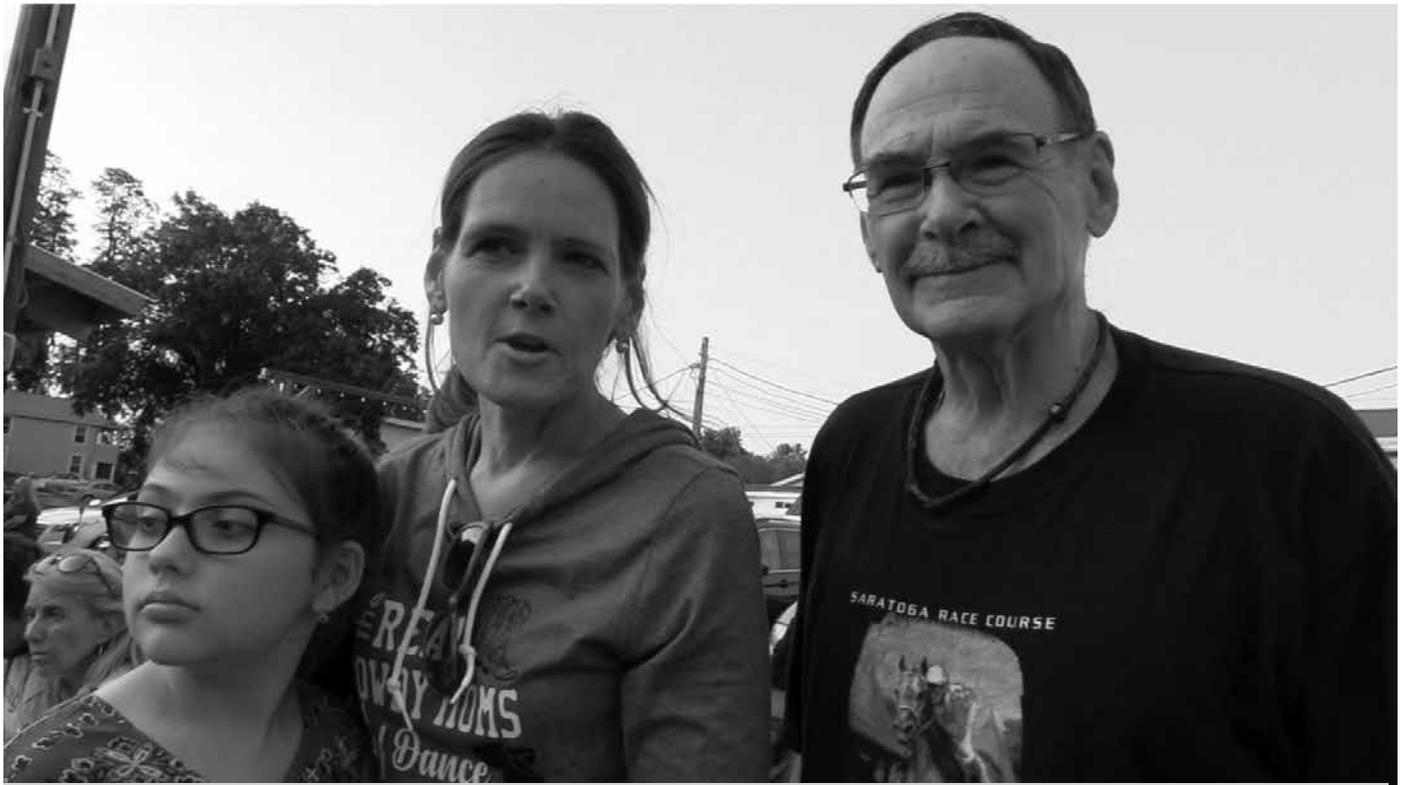
Of course, I could not just ignore my Ukrainian identity and let others ignore it! I was recorded singing Ukrainian folk songs (given my background in collecting and performing them) for the *Folklife After Hours* program at the Folklife Center at Crandall Public Library, and then assisted in editing the video presented on the library's official website, YouTube channel, and Facebook page. Also, I initiated, prepared, and hosted a *lyalka-motanka* Ukrainian traditional doll-making workshop for children, as a part of the American Doll program for the library's children's department.

Finally, the internship allowed me to visit folklore and cultural organizations and events in the area, which I think was an amazing opportunity, not only to familiarize myself with the work of other folklore organizations but also to network and establish important contacts for me as a young professional. I visited eight organizations in two states.

Overall, I found the internship to be very wisely constructed, so that an intern can acquire a set of professional skills to prepare to proceed to a successful career path.

I cannot be more grateful for the opportunity I was granted. I think that the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) and New York Folklore are making an extremely important investment, providing hands-on experience for students and recent graduates. I would like to especially express my thanks to Todd DeGarmo, Founding Director of the Folklife Center, who always supported and inspired me throughout my stay here. I would encourage students in a wide range of fields—from library science to public history to anthropology and folklore—to apply and benefit from the internship, just like I did.

Editor's note: Iryna Voloshyna's documentation of “Line Dancing at the Barn” is available on the Folklife Center's youtube channel <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=05tW0Ly-zBU&frags=pl,mn> and her *Folklife After Hours* performance is also available online at <https://crandalllibrary.org/folklife-center/programs-and-events/folklife-after-hours/>. For more information about the “Lake George On the Water” series, see p. 44.



Three generations of dancers (left to right)—Cecille, Diane, and Bill.

been following him everywhere since then. They live in Scotia, New York, but it doesn't stop them from traveling and dancing in different parts of New York and nationwide.

As I observed the cheerful crowd, enjoying themselves, my attention was caught by a young gentleman in a cowboy hat and boots, blue jeans with a leather belt and a big buckle, and a checkered shirt. His moves were smooth and elegant, and he was learning the new dances on the go, just observing his peers. There was something about his natural grace and rhythm that made me want to talk to him.

The young man turned out to be 10-year-old Thomas, who came to the Barn with his father. He has been dancing for two years so far, but, according to Kevin Richards, Thomas is already *really* good at it.

"Why do I like dancing? I can move my feet, and I can learn different dances and moves, and prove how to be a better dancer. And not to be shy out in public. It gives me [this] opportunity [...]"

And I just dance my head off!" [Thomas laughs].

I was truly amazed by such a genuine interest in dancing and became curious if there was anyone else in Thomas's family who he had learned from?

I have nobody else in the family who dances. My dad has brought me to a country line dance in Glens Falls, New York. I was learning with a group, and I just jumped out there. I felt behind, so I caught back, and I just learned as I went. I go to them every Saturday night. We basically follow Kevin Richards at almost all of his dances, and go to 'em. And if we can't, we come back and just go the next week. And I just catch up what they learned last Saturday.

When asked him about his intentions for the future and the role of line dancing in it, he didn't think twice: "Yes. I will keep dancing when I am an adult, because it gives me something to do. I get out the house, and I can actually go out and be with my friends, talk to people, and dance with people who know how to."

After the conversations with the dancers, especially with the younger ones, I once again had an overwhelming feeling of hope and certainty that the tradition will not go away.

Though it is an absolutely intangible form of folk art, it reminded me of the reflections of American folklorist Henry Glassie about the nostalgia we tend to have when it comes to the rush of passing down tradition: "Nobody, we say, makes things by hands anymore ... And we forget, it seems, what a small portion of the world we represent. At work in the United States, I met old people plying their trades and young people excited by the revival, but still I tended to think of material culture in the past tense" (Glassie 1999, 77–78).

The same could be easily assumed about line dancing—nobody will ever want to do it anymore. However, talking to recent college graduates and young children of the ages of nine and ten, who drag their parents every Saturday night out to follow the country music DJ all over New York State, does nothing



Thomas, a 10-year-old line dancer.

but assure you of the opposite. “Tradition is the creation of the future out of the past” (Glassie 2003, 176). And the future of the line dancing is being defined at this very moment. Moreover, it does look very bright to me!

Just hours away from one of the biggest metropolitan areas in the world—New York City—people gather in the village of Corinth to spend their Saturday nights line dancing, sharing the pride of their heritage, and simply having a good time together. For me, it is yet another vibrant example of the continuity, transformation, and adaptation of the tradition to the modern needs of the community. ▼

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Iryna Voloshyna grew up in Ukraine, where she collected and performed Ukrainian folk songs from her area. This year she received an



MA in Folklore from the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. Her thesis research was on Petrykivka painting, a Ukrainian folk painting technique that was inscribed in UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage list. After interning for the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage and Folklife Center at Crandall Public Library, she has moved to New York City to pursue her career as a folklorist. Iryna can be reached at voloshyna.iryana@gmail.com. Photo by Proda Photography.

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